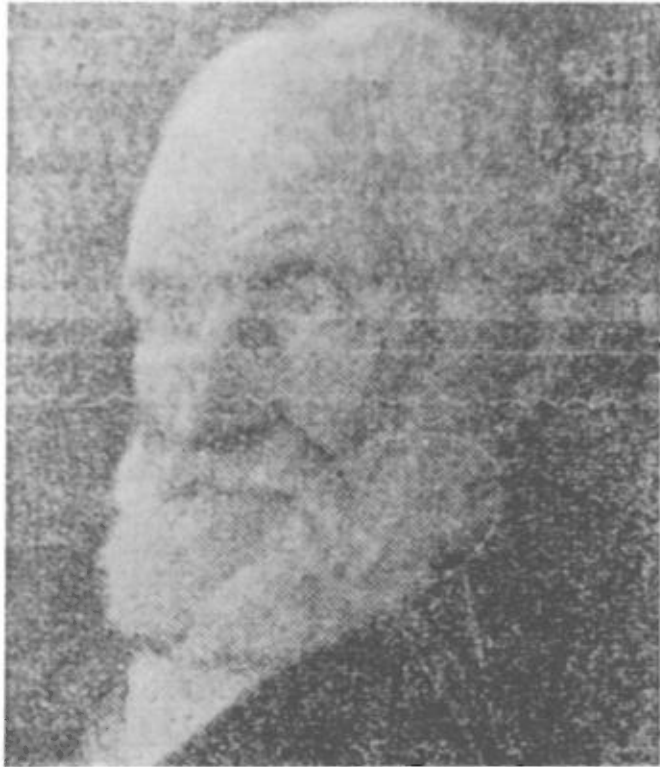
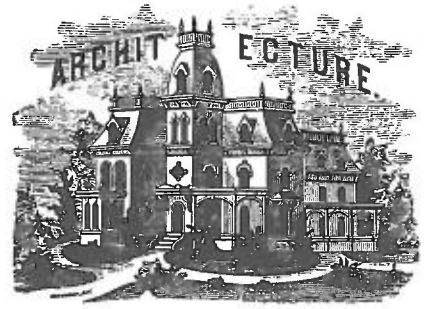


A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Calvin Chamberlain
1810-1904

The life and work of Calvin Chamberlain occupies a somewhat unusual place in the catalogue of architects and builders in Maine. A farmer, ardent horticulturist, and the author of numerous articles, Chamberlain holds the particular distinction of having designed both an octagonal barn and house, the drawings of which were published in widely circulated agricultural periodicals. The examination of his long and fruitful career provides an important glimpse into the method by which a farmer in nineteenth century Maine observed and ultimately shaped the appearance of his environment.

Chamberlain was born in the town of Foxcroft on October 8, 1810, the oldest of eleven children of Samuel and Abigail Tucker Chamberlain.¹ A graduate of Foxcroft Academy, he subsequently taught in local schools for several years. In 1836 Chamberlain moved to Michigan where he "...entered in the life-work of making a farm in another wilderness."² However, after his father's accidental death in 1838, he returned to Foxcroft to assume management of the family farm. After his first wife's death in 1842, he married Mary Tucker Converse, the widow of Freeland Converse and his first cousin once removed.

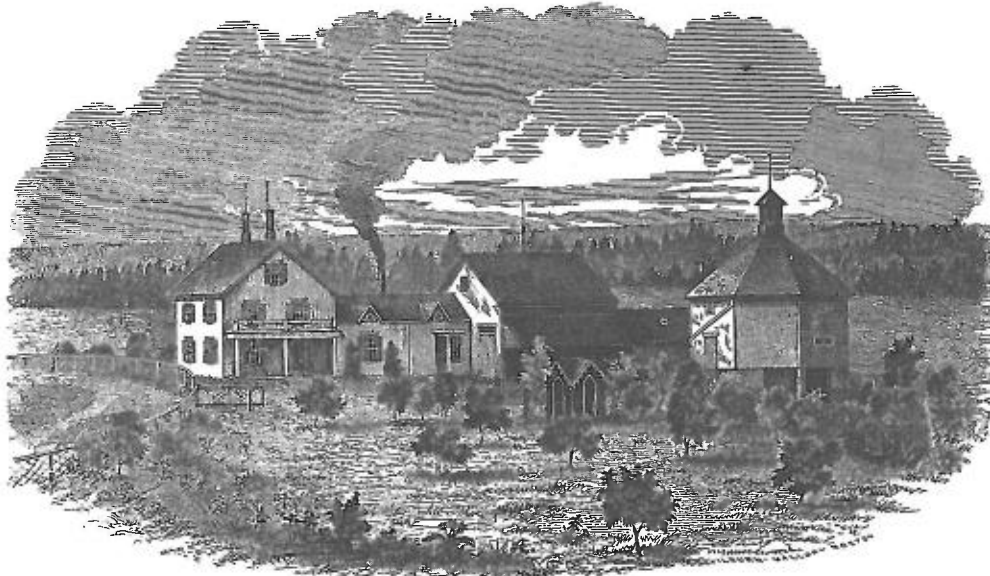
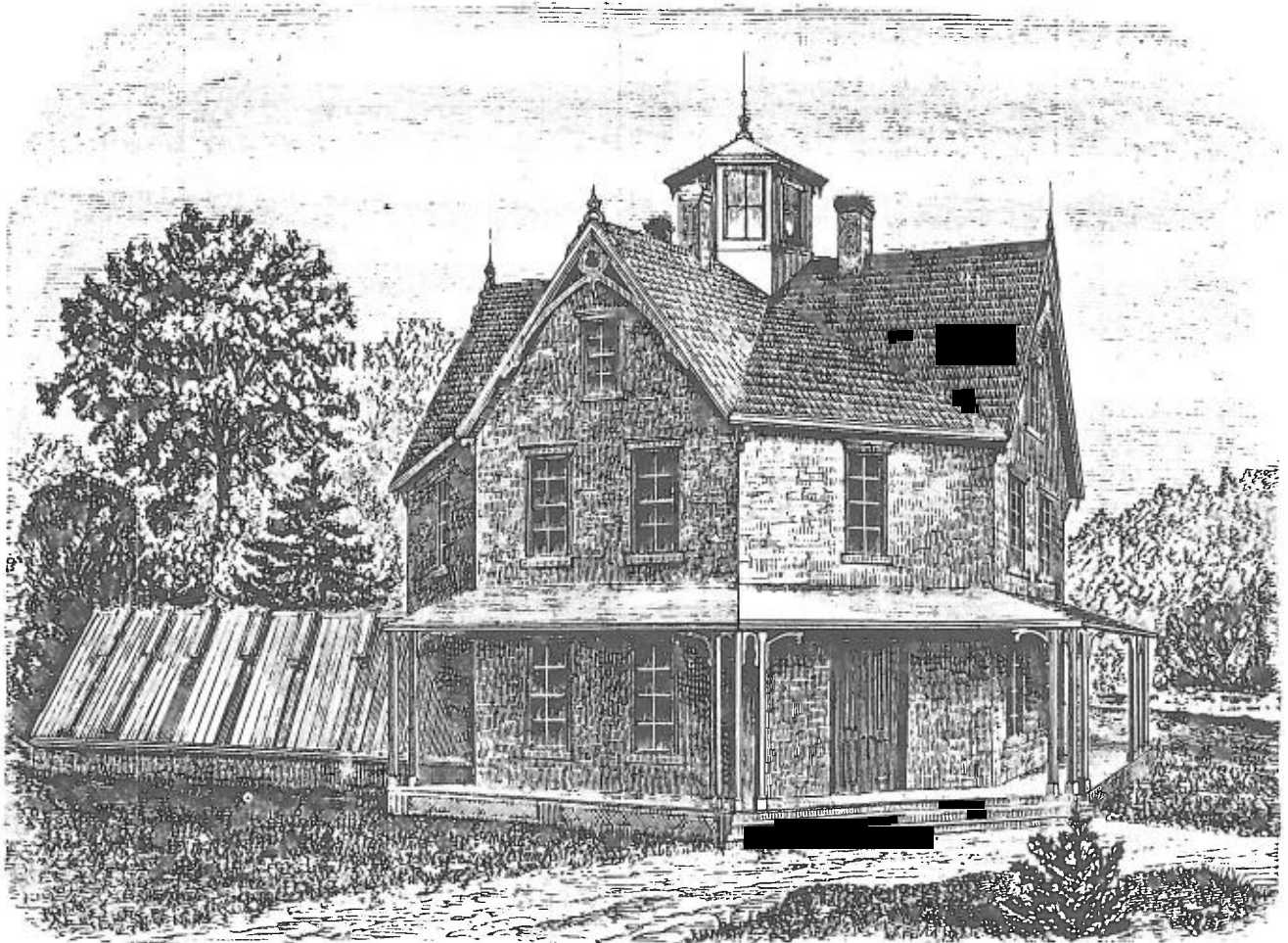


Figure 1: The Chamberlain Octagon Barn, Foxcroft, as illustrated in the 1857 edition of the *Annual Report of the Secretary of the Maine Board of Agriculture* (MHPC).



OCTAGON HOUSE - ELEVATION.

Figure 2: Chamberlain's proposed octagon house as shown in *Moore's Rural New Yorker*, May 10, 1873 (MHPC).

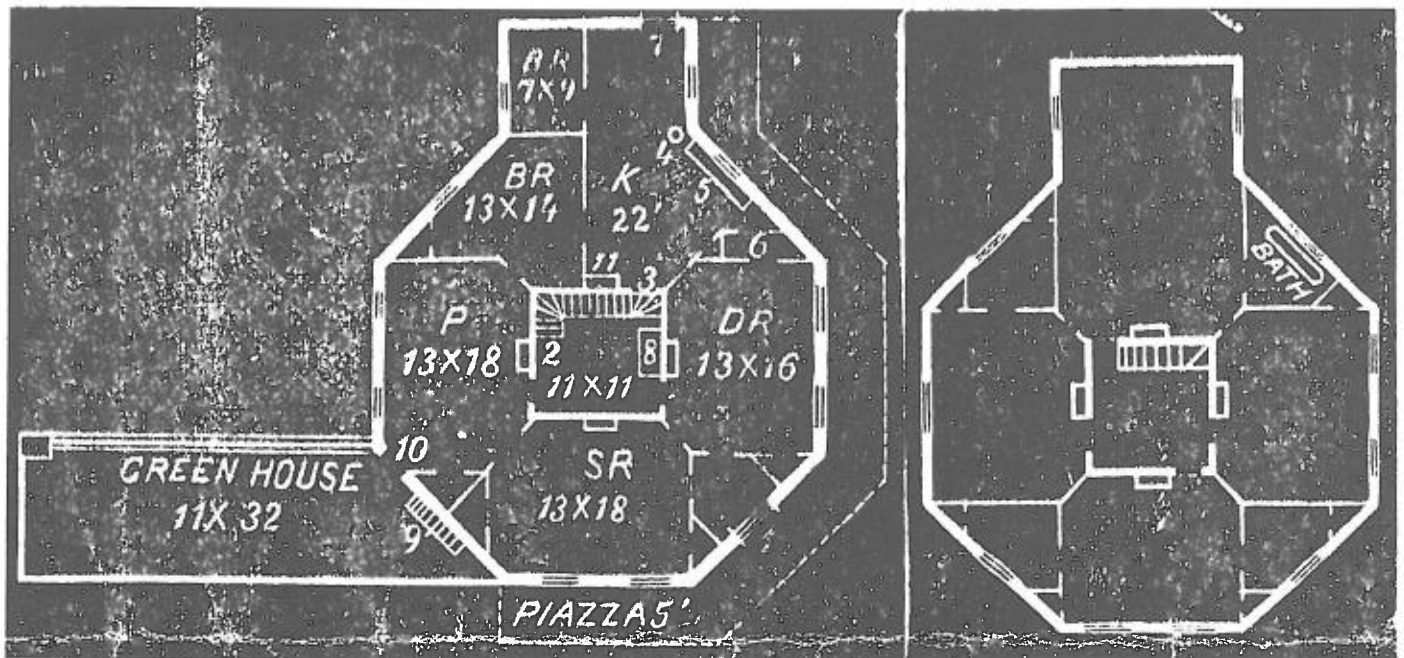


Figure 3: Floor plans for Chamberlain's proposed octagon house, *Moore's Rural New Yorker*, May 10, 1873 (MHPC).

Tradition holds that Mary Chamberlain had been left a considerable share of her first husband's estate. Finding, as one source recounts, her farm duties too arduous, she bought a twenty acre parcel of land in Foxcroft in 1851.³

Among Calvin Chamberlain's improvements to this newly acquired property was the construction in 1853 of an octagonal barn at the rear of the existing connected farm complex.⁴ Although this apparently went unnoticed by the local newspaper, it was an extraordinary design choice for an agricultural building with few, if any, precedents in Maine. Of further significance is its direct relationship to the virtues of the octagonal building form as put forth in Orson Squire Fowler's *A Home For All* of 1848. There can be little doubt that Chamberlain was aware of Fowler's book; and yet it was probably true when he recalled that "...never having seen a building in that form, and no mechanic being at hand with the skill to aid us...", it was an untested concept to him.⁵

The barn itself featured exterior walls fifteen feet in width and nineteen in height. Resting on a tall granite basement, its first floor cattle stalls were reached by a cart-way. The loft was said to have contained storage space for twenty tons of hay, a testimonial to Chamberlain's (and of course Fowler's) claim to the space saving virtue of the octagon. It was covered by a tall roof crowned by a ventilator. The barn stood until about 1915 when the site was cleared by Edward J. Mayo.⁶

An illustration, plans, and a description of Chamberlain's unique barn were published in the 1857 edition of the *Annual Report of the Secretary of the Maine Board of Agriculture* (Figure 1). The following year this article was reprinted in the *Maine Farmer*, and in 1859 the scheme was published for a third time in D. H. Jacques' *The House: A Manual of Rural Architecture*.⁷ Despite the unusually wide circulation of Chamberlain's plan, octagonal barns undoubtedly remained among the rarest of farm buildings in the state. Only one other similar structure, a hexagonal barn in Newport, is known to have been built in Maine, although there may have been others.⁸

During the late 1850s and the 1860s Chamberlain contributed a number of articles to state agricultural publications, primarily in his acknowledged position as an authority on fruit and particularly apple orchards. In 1858 the *Maine Farmer* carried his lengthy six part article entitled "Apples for Cultivation".⁹ He was subsequently published no less than eight times in the yearly agricultural reports on topics ranging from "The Soiling System" to "Protection of Forests".

In 1870 Chamberlain was appointed to a one-year term on the State Board of Agriculture. As if to justify his selection, the annual report carried a long essay by Chamberlain entitled "Our Homes: Where and What to Make Them". After a lengthy explanation of the role of geographic position in the success of the industrialized nations, the author concluded that, in an overt reference to the tide of immigration to the west, "...there is no spot on earth better for the sons of Maine than Maine herself." Finally, in one paragraph he defined a home:

A home presupposes a house; a house is always a teacher; it becomes an agent of civilization. When the house embodies fitness, truth and dignified simplicity, it sustains the national roots of these republican virtues. The dwelling exerts a mighty influence on its inhabitants.¹⁰

The character of his remarks shows that Chamberlain was intimately acquainted with and supportive of the moralistic writings of his age.

Three years after he wrote this essay, Chamberlain's architectural theories were expressed once again in the design of an octagonal house whose plan and perspective view were published in *Moore's Rural New Yorker*.¹¹ (Figures 2 & 3) The text which accompanied the drawings contains a description of the site on which Chamberlain proposed to build and one paragraph that addresses a key element of his scheme:

In talking with you of a house in detail I must put in my confession that I have become chronic with complaint regarding the national habit, in country and village, of setting up dwellings to be speedily burned down. I want my hard-earned dollars to be invested in a house that shall stand to give shelter and comfort to others when I am forgotten—a house that shall not kindle when this square mile of village, with its shingle palaces, may on some unfortunate date, be turned to smoke and ashes.¹²

Chamberlain's model house was a somewhat modified octagon, a form whose virtues he had embraced two decades earlier during the construction of his barn. His proposal called for a two-story masonry structure covered by a cross gable roof. A one-story piazza was drawn across four of the elevations and along a short ell. The porch was to be decorated with sawn brackets, the gables outfitted with vergeboards, and the roof crowned by an octagonal cupola. As a concession to Chamberlain's horticultural interests, a greenhouse was attached to one of the eight sides. The interior plan was drawn with a centrally located stair around which were grouped a cluster of rooms of nearly square and triangular shape. For whatever reasons, Chamberlain's unique proposal was never realized.

During the remainder of the 1870s, Chamberlain pursued his activities in horticulture. Examples of his native grapes exhibited at the annual state agricultural fairs received mention in both the 1873 Pomological Society Report and the 1874-75 Agricultural Society Report. In March of 1875 he and Charles H. Chandler acquired a lease to a lime quarry and kiln in the vicinity of Foxcroft.¹³ His contributions to the annual agricultural reports continued in the 1880s and 1890s although at an infrequent rate.

Chamberlain's wife died in 1892, and the remainder of his life was apparently spent alone at the house in Foxcroft. His own death came on October 22, 1904, at the age of ninety-four. Chamberlain's commitment to the conservation and improvement of both the natural and built environments, with the ultimate goal of aiding his fellow man, is perhaps best stated in his own words:

I can do no more for the fruit cause with my hands, and can only advise the people of our county of Piscataquis to continue to work for good apples and pears, believing that in and through them will come many of the blessings of life.¹⁴

Kirk F. Mohney
January, 1987

NOTES

- ¹ Chamberlain's biographical information is principally contained in Mary Chandler Lowell's *Old Foxcroft Maine Traditions and Memories with Family Records*, Concord, New Hampshire, 1935, pp. 70-72, hereinafter cited as Lowell, *Old Foxcroft*.
- ² Calvin Chamberlain, "Progress of Orchardng and Fruit Culture in Piscataquis County", *Thirty-Ninth Annual Report of the Secretary of Agriculture for the Year 1896*, Pomological Report, Augusta, 1896, p. 74.

- ³ Ansel S. Vaughn to Mary R. Chamberlain, Vol. 27, p. 198, Piscataquis County Registry of Deeds, Dover-Foxcroft.
- ⁴ The barn's 1853 date of construction is derived from the text which accompanied the publication of the drawings in the *Second Annual Report of the Secretary of the Maine Board of Agriculture*, Augusta, 1858, p. 168, hereinafter cited as *Second Annual Report*. This date is supported by the rise in the valuation of Chamberlain's farm between the tax years 1853-54. See Town of Foxcroft Tax Records for the years 1853 and 1854, Dover-Foxcroft, Maine.
- ⁵ *Second Annual Report*, p. 165.
- ⁶ A photograph of Chamberlain's former residence appeared in the May, 1915, issue of *Sprague's Journal of Maine History*.
- ⁷ *Maine Farmer*, July 15, 1858, p. 1. D. H. Jacques, *The House: A Manual of Rural Architecture: or How to Build Country Houses and Out Buildings*, New York, 1859, pp. 132-134.
- ⁸ The date of construction of this barn is not positively known, although it is believed to have been built in the 1850s. National Register nomination for the Hexagon Barn, Maine Historic Preservation Commission, Augusta, October, 1979.
- ⁹ *Maine Farmer*, April 5, April 12, April 19, April 26, May 3, May 10, 1858.
- ¹⁰ Calvin Chamberlain, "Our Homes: Where and What to Make Them", *Fifteenth Annual Report of the Secretary of the Maine Board of Agriculture for the Year 1870*, Augusta, 1871, p. 77.
- ¹¹ *Moore's Rural New Yorker* commenced publication at Rochester, New York in January, 1850 under the direction of D. T. Moore. From its inception the periodical carried model designs for rural and suburban buildings.
- ¹² *Moore's Rural New Yorker*, Rochester, May 10, 1873, p. 1.
- ¹³ Caleb Weston to Charles H. Chandler and Calvin Chamberlain, Vol. 67, p. 466, Piscataquis County Registry of Deeds, Dover-Foxcroft. It is not yet known for what period of time this lime quarry was in operation.
- ¹⁴ *Twenty-Seventh Annual Report of the Maine Board of Agriculture for the Year 1884*, Augusta, 1884, p. 381.

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY CALVIN CHAMBERLAIN

Calvin Chamberlain Octagon Barn, Foxcroft, 1853, Destroyed.
Calvin Chamberlain Octagon House, Foxcroft, 1873, Not Executed.

Photograph of Calvin Chamberlain
Courtesy of the Bangor Daily News

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